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DE RUEHLB #0496/01 1201657  
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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4795  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3722  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000496

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR PM - RUGGIERO  
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY  
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT  
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA  
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
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DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/30/2019

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: DDEFMIN MURR ON FOUR GENERALS, MARCH 14

REF: A. 131443Z APR 09

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 00490

[1](#)C. BEIRUT 00285

[1](#)D. 2008 BEIRUT 1780

[1](#)E. BEIRUT 00108

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Defense Minister Elias Murr told the Ambassador April 30 that the release of the four generals held in connection with the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri would provide the opposition with ammunition against March [1](#)14. Murr assessed the Christian community was especially vulnerable to opposition propaganda about the generals and said March 14 should focus its efforts on that community. In particular, said Murr, March 14 leaders should highlight Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun's ties to Hizballah and "scare" the Christians away from voting for the Hizballah-Aoun alliance.

[1](#)2. (C) According to Murr, security for the June 7 parliamentary elections is advancing on schedule. Murr re-deployed eleven brigades and seven commando battalions in preparation for the event. Murr was pleased with the messages he received during his early April trip to the United States and also expressed satisfaction with Secretary Clinton's recent trip to Lebanon. Based on his recent conversation with KSA Minister of State Khoja, Murr expected that Saudi money for support to March 14 would re-start three weeks before the June 7 parliamentary elections. He planned to continue his dialogue with Saudi King Abdullah after the elections regarding funding for the LAF. Murr also is working to turn away the Russian offer of MiG-29 aircraft, and, separately, pursue helicopters from the UAE, he said. End summary.

RELEASE OF FOUR GENERALS  
A BLOW TO MARCH 14  
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[1](#)3. (C) Meeting April 30 with the Ambassador, accompanied by PolEconOff, Defense Minister Elias Murr said the previous day's decision by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) to release the four generals held in connection with the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was a

blow to March 14. Nonetheless, Murr assessed that Sunni leader Saad Hariri's public statement following the generals' release was "fair," given the circumstances of Rafiq Hariri's death. Murr acknowledged that the release of the generals showed that the STL was not politicized, a factor that would be important if Lebanese actors, especially Hizballah, were implicated by the court in the future.

14. (C) Murr assessed that opinions in the Sunni and Shia communities would not change following the generals' release, but expressed concern about attitudes in Lebanon's Christian community. Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun will take advantage of the release of the generals to highlight corruption in March 14 and the judiciary as a whole, for keeping the generals in jail without charges, Murr said. (Note: Aoun and his allies in local press have already started to emphasize judicial accountability. End note.) Murr assessed that this opposition argument was gaining traction among Christians.

15. (C) Among the four generals, former LAF G-2 intelligence chief Raymond Azar, former head of the presidential guard yMustafa Hamdan, and former Internal Security Services (ISF) chief Ali Hajj were "out of the game," Murr said. Azar reached retirement age six months ago and Hamdan, now the same rank as LAF Commander General Kahwagi, is unable to return to the army under LAF regulations. As a Sunni, Hajj will flounder without the support of Sunni leader Hariri, added Murr.

16. (C) However, he continued, Former Director of General Security General Jamil Sayyed would continue to be a threat

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to March 14. Murr opined that Hizballah could even propose Sayyed as a minister in the new cabinet, perhaps even nominating Sayyed as Foreign Minister. In Murr's opinion, Hizballah would push for the foreign, defense, or interior portfolios to make a point against March 14, even though President Sleiman would likely refuse to sign such nominations. Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, however, could serve as a potential opposition naysayer to this plan, as Sayyed is a rival in the Shia community, said Murr. Murr also noted that Berri had been absent at Sayyed's home the night before, where many Hizballah an\$ opposition figures had gathered after the generals' release, and has been quiet on the topic of the release.

#### ELECTION SECURITY

17. (C) Expressing confidence about the LAF's ability to provide security for June 7 election, Murr told the Ambassador he had five days ago rearranged all eleven LAF brigades and seven commando battalions to prepare for the election. In both Sidon and Tripoli, Murr deployed a brigade, led by a Sunni commander, and also the two commando battalions -- to include the Ranger Regiment, Marine Commandos, and Air Assault Regiment. Two Ranger Regiment companies will remain in Roumieh as backup, and Murr noted that these companies would have easy access to Beirut in case of violence there.

18. (C) Murr planned to visit the brigades and the special operation units soon to boost morale and urge soldiers to remain neutral in the run-up to elections (something LAF Commander General Jean Kahwagi is already doing). Murr told the Ambassador that LAF Commander Kahwagi was doing an excellent job. Murr had passed Kahwagi a list of the names of "troublemakers" in vulnerable areas in Lebanon, such as the Bekaa, Sidon, and Tripoli, and Kahwagi was contacting each individual cited to warn them against causing problems with the election. Interior Minister Ziad Baroud was scheduled to present Murr's election security plan at the April 30 cabinet session (which is set to begin at 1800), Murr added.

SATISFIED WITH US MESSAGE

19. (C) Murr said he was pleased with his early April meetings in Washington, especially with Defense Secretary Gates (Ref A) and Secretary Clinton. Murr appreciated Secretary Gates' letter of support and planned to translate and distribute it to his soldiers. He assessed that the letter would reach more than 60,000 LAF. He particularly appreciated Secretary Gate's strong commitment to assisting Lebanon in building the capabilities of the LAF to extend GOL control over Lebanon's territory and in counter-terror efforts.

THREE THEMES FOR MARCH 14

10. (C) March 14 should stick to three main themes from now until the elections, Murr said. First, the coalition should highlight the arms of Hizballah and the group's "goal of acting as a state within the state." Second, March 14 leaders should remind the Lebanese people of the incidents of May 7, 2008, when Hizballah turned its arms against them. Third, March 14 should stress the many assassinations and attempts that occurred over the last several years.

11. (C) March 14 needs to "scare the Christians," Murr said, and to show them that a vote for Aoun equals a vote for Hizballah. Leaders should point to Hizballah and Iran as the enemies. Criticism of Syria only gains traction in Lebanon's Sunni community, in which the votes are already decided. Christians no longer fear Syria but are still threatened by Iran and Hizballah, Murr (a Greek Orthodox) judged. Gemayel and Geagea need to attack Aoun "in the headlines," and equate a vote for Aoun as a vote for Hizballah. Murr asked the U.S. to encourage March 14 coalition leaders to stress these points in their campaigning.

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12. (C) The coalition had suffered four shocks recently, Murr said: (a) the release of the four generals; (b) Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's leaked statements against the Sunnis and Christians; (c) the general atmosphere within March 14; and (d) the nomination of "nobody" Eli Karame in the Metn. On Jumblatt, Murr assessed that if Jumblatt failed to criticize Hizballah's arms strongly, he would lose the Christians in the Chouf. Kataeb head Amine Gemayel and Lebanese Forces (LF) Samir Geagea were picking "names for names," not with the intention of winning the majority in the next cabinet, Murr complained. (Note: Ambassador has a meeting scheduled with Geagea on Monday, May 4 to urge once again March 14 unity, particularly with regard to the Christian March 14 population. End note.)

METN

13. (C) Murr, who comes from a dynasty of Metn political heavyweights, criticized Kataeb's selection of Eli Karame, who is not from the Metn, as a candidate in the district. Murr also bemoaned LF's selection of Eddy Abillamaa, who in Murr's opinion, had no chance to win. March 14 will lose two MPs from the Metn "for nothing," he said heatedly. Aoun's candidate, FPM Ibrahim Kenaan, is well-liked and will probably win. Despite these issue, Murr will back the March 14 list and expressed satisfaction with campaign efforts by Geagea, Gemayel, and his father, who is a long-time Metn MP.

14. (C) Murr said he had tried to prevent Minister of State Nassib Lahoud from withdrawing his candidacy in the Metn. According to Murr, Lahoud had been concerned that Gemayel did not support his candidacy and, after meeting with both Murr and the President, had made up his mind to withdraw.

SAUDI MONEY

WILL START SOON

15. (C) Ambassador asked about any recent March 14 interaction with the KSA. In a meeting with former Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Khoja during the latter's recent secret visit (Ref B), Murr reported. Murr had asked about Saudi intentions to restart funding to March 14 leaders. According to Murr, Khoja said KSA would send money three weeks before the June 7 election. Riyadh was concerned that if March 14 leaders received money farther in advance, they would seek to "buy out" electoral slots from their allies, fingering in particular Jumblatt and Geagea. Murr guessed, however, that the Saudis had made a deal with Hariri that he would spend from his own bank account now, and KSA would reimburse him later.

16. (C) Riyadh, according to Murr, would push for Hariri to become Prime Minister if March 14 won the majority in the upcoming election. Murr believed the Saudis would "open a highway for the LAF" and give Hariri whatever he asked for in terms of funding for military assistance. Khoja told Murr that Saudi King Abdullah welcomed a visit by Murr to the Kingdom following the June 7 election to continue the conversation about defense money (Ref C). Separately, Murr said the UAE had not been unduly upset by General Kahwagi's premature announcement in the media that the UAE was funding the transfer of ten M-60 tanks to Lebanon.

17. (C) Murr also expressed his intention to stay on as Minister of Defense in the new cabinet, "if" the majority, whichever side that may be, agreed. (Note: Although he was not explicit, he intimated that President Sleiman was on board with this plan. End note.) Murr expected, however, that Aoun would try to veto his selection. Murr told the Ambassador that General Kahwagi had paid him a visit because he had worried that Murr may not accept the position. Kahwagi told Murr that soldiers, including Kahwagi and the LAF Chief of Intelligence (G-2 General Edmond Fadel), would leave en masse if Murr were replaced.

PLAYING DOWN RUSSIAN MIGS

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18. (C) The Russian Ministry of Defense April 27 approved the agreement to release the MiG-29s it offered in December (Ref D), Murr said, but he said he was still working to turn the issue off. He told Russian President Putin that he could not visit Moscow now as he was focused on elections. When Hariri followed up with Murr on the issue, Murr told Hariri to "stay quiet" while Murr worked on procuring alternative aircraft from elsewhere. On this issue, Murr expressed interest in traveling to the Abu Dhabi soon for meetings and a media blitz about UAE equipment, including the ten PUMA transport helicopters the UAE has offered to donate (Ref E). Murr also hoped to sign a primary accord on the purchase of ten Hawk aircraft from the UAE during this planned visit.

COMMENT

19. (C) Murr's assessment of the STL's release of the four generals matches what we have been hearing elsewhere. His and Hariri's emphasis on the neutrality of the STL is the best counter to opposition slogans of corruption in March 14 and the judiciary. The possibility that Hizballah would nominate Sayyed as Foreign Minister is just plain awful. It is unlikely to gain traction, however, and would at a minimum delay the formation of the cabinet after the June 7 parliamentary elections.

20. (C) Murr's confidence in the LAF's ability to maintain security on election day is reassuring. He is taking important steps, such as repositioning the battalions and

commando brigades, far in advance of June 7. As far as unity among March 14 Christians goes, Murr's clear talking points on Hizballah could help get all the leaders back on the same page. End comment.

SISON